DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 235 CS 213 273

AUTHOR Oswal, Sushil K.
TITLE The Writing Processes of a Blind Administrator: A Case Study.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrators; *Blindness; Case Studies; Higher Education; Qualitative Research; Special Needs Students; *Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Research Suggestions; *Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

Even though increasing numbers of blind students have been attending schools and colleges, little research has appeared specifically on the writing processes of blind writers. This paper presents a case study which developed a preliminary process account of the composing techniques of a blind executive who administers a medium-sized social service agency in the field of blindness, focusing on the social context in which this blind administrator writes. Data were collected using open-ended and discourse-based interviews, a tape recording of an early morning work session, and written text samples over a six-week period. It was found that the executive takes care of most of his writing tasks between 6 AM and 9:30 AM. Further, the executive's composing processes for written communication and for speeches as revealed in the study are discussed, his revision process as one involving collaboration with his assistant is described, and it is noted that he spent an equal amount of time on invention, arrangement, and revision for most letters, but devoted greater time to invention activities for journal articles and speeches. Implications for writing teachers include the need to assimilate the issues related to the teaching of writing to blind students in general pedagogy, and the need for a resource bank on teaching writing to blind students. Implications for researchers include the need for a detailed study of the state of writing instruction for the blind. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sushil K. Oswal
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Sushil K. Oswal
University of Cincinnati

ED345235

The Writing Processes of a Blind Administrator
A Case Study

ABSTRACT

Even though increasing numbers of blind students have been attending schools and colleges, little research has appeared specifically on the writing processes of blind writers. This article presents a case study of a blind executive who administers a medium-sized social service agency in the field of blindness. The focus of this study is on the social context in which this blind administrator writes. Using the qualitative techniques of Open-ended and discourse-based Interviews, Tape Recordings and Written Text Samples, this study develops a preliminary process account of the composing techniques of a blind writer. Some of the implications for writing teachers include:

-We need to assimilate the issues related to the teaching of writing to blind students in our general pedagogy
-We must have the same high expectations from blind students that we have from sighted students
-Paul's use of the cut-and-paste method for braille drafts suggests that we can develop simple techniques to deal with the writing problems of blind students
-Volunteer help from expert blind writers is possible for handling the problems of blind students
-We should involve blind students in solving such problems
-We can advise the use of tape recorders for in-class writing and preliminary drafts
-We should make adaptive technology available in our computer labs
-A CCCC resource bank is needed for information on teaching writing to blind students

The implications for researchers include:

-his personal context forces Paul to follow an austere schedule
-different writing tasks require different adaptive techniques
-the serious neglect in Paul's writing instruction indicates that a detailed survey is needed on the state of writing instruction for blind students
-researchers should collaborate with blind writers to learn more about their writing processes to understand
(1) how does Paul's method of collaborative revision affect both the rhetorical and social contexts of his writing?
(2) connection between type of organization and blind employee's writing.

CS213273

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Statement of the Problem

Even though increasing numbers of blind students have been attending schools and colleges, little research has appeared specifically on the writing processes of blind writers. This article presents a case study of a blind executive who administers a medium-sized social service agency in the field of blindness. The focus of this study is on the social context in which this blind administrator writes.

I initiated this study to contrast the writing strategies of a blind writer and a sighted writer. However, after I interviewed my participant for the first time, I realized that writing strategies vary among blind administrators perhaps as much as they do among the sighted. It would be impossible to reach any conclusions about the differences by observing one participant. From that moment, my focus shifted to studying my participant's composing strategies as a blind writer. Because this project has been conceived as a preliminary inquiry, I include only those interpretations of this participant's actual writing which offer insights in this organization's context.

The materials covered by this case study extend to a brief period of six weeks and I have applied interpretive and ethnographical tools, that is, rhetorical and organizational analyses, as well as narrative descriptions to develop a portrait of the main participant.

General Background of the Participant and His Agency

Association For the Blind (ATB) is a medium-sized social service agency with one hundred forty employees catering to an urban center of more than a million people.[1] The Association provides services in the fields of general eye care/testing, rehabilitation programs and occupational training. The Association also serves as a delivery agency for many federal and state government programs. ATB's production workshop employs over eighty disabled workers and is the largest employer of handicapped people in the area.

Paul, age 43, has a master's degree in rehabilitation counselling (education) from New York University, and he has taken several undergraduate and graduate courses in public administration to refine his management skills. Even though his writing instruction was, at best, neglected by his teachers and parents throughout his schooling because of his visual impairment, he taught himself to write with the help of his colleagues at work during the past fifteen years. Although he calls himself an 'okay writer', his writing samples suggest that he has expert knowledge and understanding about the dynamics of writing, and his general writing skills are excellent. Paul, who has over fifteen years of experience in management and services evaluation in

agencies for the blind, has been the executive director of ATB for the last five years. He administers all aspects of ATB's services with the help of five department managers and an advisory board of part-time directors.

A great deal of Paul's time is expended in departmental and Board meetings, attending professional conferences and seminars related to the work of his organization and taking care of general administration. In addition to his work at ATB, Paul also goes on public speaking tours across the country, and part of his writing is related to the preparation of outlines for his speeches. He spends about eighty percent of his time in verbal communication (person-to-person or person-to-group interaction), whereas the rest of the time is spent in reading and writing related activities. The writing tasks in which he participates include correspondence, memos, minutes, reports, speeches and journal articles. Even though Paul's department managers perform most of these tasks at departmental level, the most significant documents are either drafted by Paul or he collaborates in their writing process through his comments and critiques. He dictates most of his correspondence to a Dictaphone for his executive assistant, Meryl [assistant], who types these materials and revises them with Paul. He uses braille for note-taking in most situations, but he never writes complete drafts in braille.

Review of the Literature

Odell and Doheny-Farina's guidelines for ethnographical research on writing and Jack Selzer's study of an engineer have been helpful in designing this study.

While initiating this investigation, I made two basic assumptions:

1. The writing processes of a blind administrator will certainly be different from those of a sighted administrator, considering his vision-related limitations.

2. The special adaptive technology used for writing purposes by this blind writer has some impact on his writing processes as well as his written discourse.[2]

Methods and Procedures

Open-ended Interviews

On the basis of Doheny-Farina's method, I collected background data about Paul, his employer-organization and his professional field in a preliminary interview which lasted 75 minutes (164). In a second 90 minute meeting, I

interviewed him to discuss his writing strategies and the social contexts in which he writes.

Discourse-based Interviews

Following Odell, Goswami, Herrington, and Quick's model of discourse-based interviews, I had a third session with Paul to inquire about his reasons for choosing certain strategies over others in his writing (26). During this interview, I also sought additional information on employing adaptive technology for writing.

Tape Recording of an Early Morning Work Session

Paul made a tape recording in my absence to give me a sample of an early morning work session. During this session he does background reading for his writing and other purposes, dictates letters to a Dictaphone and makes other preparations for the rest of the day.

Written Text Samples

I collected five samples of Paul's writing that he had collaborated with or drafted. I prepared transcripts of the interviews and tape recorded session for analysis. I also analyzed all his writings to understand the audience purpose and organizational context relationships in specific rhetorical situations.

Results

Paul's Regimen as a Writer

Paul has a rigorous schedule for his day. He arrives at his office sometime after 6 in the morning and works on his correspondence, writing, reading and any other work for which he needs time free from other organizational obligations. Since his office hours are from 8:30 A.M. to 4 P.M., he has at least two hours to himself for taking care of this writing and other business.

Paul's activities may lead us to believe that his eclectic early morning schedule is purely linked with the factor of blindness, and we may perceive certain important relationships of his visual disability to his professional and social attitudes. However, Paul claimed that organizational demands are, in fact, a greater factor than his blindness in determining his work behavior and professional attitudes. He states, "I came to the conclusion, maybe two or three years ago, that I'll always have to work overtime; perhaps a little bit because of my blindness, but much more importantly, because of my

commitment to do the best possible job. I cannot do that if I work 8:30 to 4:30."

Paul meets his assistant from 8:30 to 9:30 to discuss the tasks they are planning to do as a team. Paul considers her a very close associate and wants to discuss important work before he begins his day in the office. He rarely gets a chance to speak to her during the rest of the day. During this one-hour session, they jointly plan new writing and revise the drafts typed up the day before. Later in the afternoon, he reads his mail with a volunteer reader. Though it is his policy to answer all phone calls and letters within 48 hours, at times he has to postpone some of the replies for a day or two because of the lack of a specific piece of information or because of time constraints. The next morning, he rereads the notes from the previous day's correspondence before he goes on to dictate his replies. He spends the rest of the day in staff meetings, on the phone, attending business lunches and speaking to audiences outside his organization. Paul believes that his job is primarily to monitor, that is, to see what everybody else is doing, to listen and respond to others' communications, to motivate and to understand.

Planning and Drafting

Composing Process for Written Communication

Paul recorded two cassettes of planning and dictating sessions on one of the mornings after I had held two open-ended interviews with him.

Paul works alone during these sessions while a radio or recorded magazines play in the background. These recorded magazines are related to the field of blindness and can be regarded as semi-professional journals since they deal with the current issues in his field.

On this particular morning, Paul verbalized each of his activities as he went about doing his routine preparations. While reading or sometimes thinking, he would become silent, but then he would give a summary of what he read or what he was thinking. An important part of this recording was his dictation process.

While verbalizing his thoughts during this session, Paul confirmed the observations other think-aloud protocol participants have made in previous studies; he thought that the exercise forced him to think more carefully (Emig).

Two main points emerge from this taped commentary by Paul:

1. Paul often sat back and thought for ten to sixty seconds, as he read letters. This silent brainstorming

session should be regarded as the first invention exercise he does to initiate a writing task.

2. In this morning session, Paul's first step is to review personal memoranda and the braille notes from the previous afternoon's mail. Paul views this early morning starter activity as his major creative session because he is energetic at this hour and has no interruptions. It can be speculated that during this first reading of his notes he plans the writing of his replies. It is also possible that this planning starts even earlier when he listens to his mail and takes braille notes.

Later, Paul dictated four letters at a speed of 60 w.p.m. with few interruptions. During this fluent dictating, he revised approximately every sixth sentence once or twice. His process was that of dictating a sentence and then moving to the next sentence after announcing the end punctuation mark with strong emphasis. But, when he was not satisfied with the sentence, he restarted that sentence or a clause of the sentence by saying, "No, let me try it again...".

Two of these letters were very straightforward informational letters, whereas the third one had certain outstanding rhetorical features. This letter was addressed to one of his professional colleagues outside the organization, who also works for an organization that provides services to the blind and may be regarded as his professional competitor. In this letter, Paul made the largest number of sentence level revisions, and the majority of them were rhetorical. A keen sense of audience awareness is evident from his lexical choices and the manner of addressing his audience.

Paul often gave punctuation and paragraph shift directions to his assistant though these directions were not always perfect. As in most executive dictations, this editing is done by his assistant while she keys the draft into her word processor.

Another format feature of Paul's dictation was his use of shell sentences and paragraphs. Whenever he wanted to cite a text, he referred to it or to a part of it in an aside remark, and provided his assistant with a shell sentence such as, "Regarding your inquiry on Bimonthly Employee Award [Meryl, please fill in the full title], I would like to state that the complete guidelines are listed in the section [please insert the exact section number and title here] of the Employee Reward Manual." Similarly, he asked his assistant to insert a full paragraph from an agency regulation book after providing the topic statement for that paragraph. Though the use of shell sentences and boiler plates is common in professional writing, in Paul's case the choice of this strategy may have some connection to his

blindness. If this connection exists, it may be important to study the effect of this technique on his writing.

Composing Process for Speeches

For short speeches on familiar topics, Paul uses brief canned braille notes. For major presentations, he develops braille outlines before filling in various details for each step. In this process, like any other writer, he asks the basic audience-analysis questions.

After this initial outlining and drafting, he reorganizes the key points in the text to suit his purpose. In case he comes up with several new points or notices some major ommissions, he has to throw away that sheet and start again, saving notes from the old sheet. Since he can't scratch out or insert text in braille, sometimes he cuts the sheet half way down and adds another one. This method of combining braille notes is very similar to the cut and paste method sighted writers often use in drafting.

At times, Paul starts thinking about his presentations even a week or two before outlining, while commuting to work. Sometimes he takes notes in braille without any outline long before sitting down to write. Paul mentioned that he does a lot of speech writing on weekends. During those weekend sessions he'll sit down with his notes and make a systematic outline. He generally spends about 45 minutes just thinking about the presentation before writing it. Paul puts it this way, "I like to think about what I want...just envisioning it, sort of picturing my being up there, envisioning what I want to say. Then, I take some notes....put them aside that night unless I am running into some deadline, and then I'll begin to write the next day. I do not like this last part, writing speeches, but I love giving them". Paul does not enjoy reading his own speeches in full because for him braille reading is very time-consuming.

Revision as Collaboration

While preparing for a presentation for an external audience, Paul researches facts about his audience, background information on the topic and the scholarly literature in the field with the help of his assistant.

When Paul has dictated his first draft and it is typed by his assistant, he reviews the print draft with her to make final revisions. Whereas he takes care of sentence level problems during these sessions, he delegates the macro organizational problems to his assistant. His assistant also eliminates repetitive phrases and sentences that Paul might not have noticed while dictating. For example, he might start two sentences with the same phrase, or repeat the same subject phrase in two sentences in a row instead of referring back to the subject of the previous sentence.

In this situation, Paul and his assistant truly become collaborative writers. While the problem is often diagnosed by Paul as the assistant reads the draft aloud, the remedy is found by the assistant. Paul reviews the final draft before it is sent out. Revisions on the final draft are sometimes stymied for a minute or two while they search for a particular word or phrase. Once again, Paul and Meryl collaborate in the revision process as she reads out the typed pre-final draft to him.

If it is an important document, Paul takes detailed braille notes. In such cases, he listens to his own dictation to make phrase and sentence level revisions.

Paul spends an equal amount of time on invention, arrangement and revision for most letters; however, he devotes greater time to invention activities for journal articles which generally go through four drafts. For significant speeches, he spends up to 85 percent of his time in invention activities such as brainstorming and braille note-taking (listing), ten percent in revision and only five percent in rearrangement.

Implications

As this case study indicates, the personal context of the writer and the organizational context within which he works are inseparable. Nevertheless, researchers can examine the writing of a variety of blind writers in order to trace certain patterns and themes which could enable them to develop a provisional model. Because expert blind writers have a first-hand understanding of coping with their visual disability, their experience can shed valuable light on the variety of social contexts in which they write.

This type of theorizing should not be aimed at arriving at a set paradigm of writing by blind writers. Rather, it should act as a guide for writing teachers. Because blind students have been integrated into public schools, it has become essential that their teachers attain an understanding of the dynamics of writing as they pertain to blind writers ranging from the novice to the expert.

Implications for Researchers

In the description of his daily routine, Paul states that he does not do any writing during the day (though it can be asked if the reading of mail is not the first step in the process of composing a reply). Whereas in the first interview Paul emphasized that he adopted his early morning routine to make up for his slow speed as a blind person, in the second meeting he speculated that he probably would have

worked in the early hours even if he were sighted because he likes to keep his day free for all other administrative tasks and activities. Although it is not possible to generalize on the basis of one case study whether a writer's blindness enforces a more rigorous schedule of work, it can be safely concluded that in Paul's case his visual disability has not only affected his writing strategies but also the social context in which this writing takes place. Further, the demands of written communication have given a specific shape to Paul's view of the organization in which he works. In other words, Paul appears to follow a more austere daily schedule than his sighted counterparts to prove that he can be just as efficient. Additional information is needed regarding the impact of adaptive technology on writing speed and efficiency.

We may further ask, how does Paul's method of revision, that is, his assistant reading drafts to him while he makes alterations, affect both the rhetorical and social contexts of his writing? Researchers may investigate whether their collaboration is any different from that of sighted executives with their assistants.

Just as the writing strategies of sighted writers have a broad range, so we can assume that blind writers have their personal strategies to suit individual writing tasks. Similarly, blind writers may need to use different approaches and strategies for solving different problems because the technology available to them is only adaptive and not an exact duplicate of the one used by the sighted. For example, Paul uses braille and Dictaphone for very distinct purposes. Likewise, he makes sharp distinctions between writing tasks and applies a different set of strategies for each of these categories. During the interviews, he told me that he rarely reviews the routine letters dictated to his assistant, but in the case of professional articles, he goes through three or four drafts with his collaborators. To learn about such composing processes, researchers can participate in collaborative projects with blind writers.

This study also raises the question of whether the specific nature of the organization has an impact on the writing processes of a blind writer. For example, I found that Paul's use of a braille typewriter and a reader for handling his mail was regarded as normal in this agency for the blind. Further research is needed to learn how such adjustments affect the overall social context in other organizations and how the organizational members perceive these adjustments. Do their perceptions have any influence on the performance of the blind employee/writer?

Implications for Teachers of Writing

Paul's regimen suggests that his composition strategies are directly linked to the writing purpose. While he composes important letters, speeches and journal articles in braille, for daily mail and routine memos he uses a dictaphone and the help of his assistant. Likewise, Paul's use of cut-and-paste method for braille drafts suggests that teachers can develop simple techniques to deal with the writing problems of blind students.

Teachers should consider the use of tape recorders by blind students for in-class writing and preliminary drafts. Teachers can also encourage the use of new computer technology for intermediary writers. Speech synthesizers, braille computer displays and Braille N" Speak systems (talking laptop computer system with a braille keyboard) are readily available on American market and teachers can explore their applicability in specific cases with the help of local service agencies for the blind.

Conclusion

Even though it is not possible to reach any final conclusions about the state of teaching practices for visually impaired students in our schools and colleges on the basis of this limited sample, the serious neglect in Paul's writing instruction however indicates that a detailed survey is needed on the state of writing instruction for blind students. Since most teachers do not have a special education background, and since blind students are a small minority among the sighted student population in any school, teachers may not even realize the need for developing special teaching strategies.

For a long-term solution for these problems, we need to assimilate the issues related to the teaching of writing to blind students in our general pedagogy. We must have the same high expectations from blind students that we have from sighted students.

We can explore the possibility of using the volunteer help of expert blind writers in devising solutions for some of these tasks. In this process, we must involve those blind students whose problems we are trying to solve.

Notes

1. I have changed the names of real persons and institutions to protect their privacy.

2. Some of the assumptions made by Stephen Doheny-Farina in his article, "Writing in an Emerging Organization: An Ethnographic Study", are also applicable to my study. I present these assumptions in the manner that they relate to my project.

A. Rhetorical discourse is context-bound and is shaped by exigence, audience, purpose, and ethos.

B. To learn about the dynamics of writing, the researcher examines and analyzes a writer's interactions as they are evident in social and cultural settings.

C. A close inquiry into the communication and other processes of an organization can provide us a fuller understanding of the elements which shape writing in non-academic settings.

D. Individuals are guided by both personal and organizational dialogues; therefore, it is essential to know about these ideologies.

E. The researcher must make as many interpretations as possible of the participant's acts so as to obtain a broader and deeper understanding of various processes.

F. The researcher must play a dual role of an empathetic 'participant' and 'observer' while dealing with the participant in the study.

Works Consulted

Appendices 1-5.

Applebee, Arthur N. "Writing and Learning in School Settings." *What Writers Know: the Language Process and Structure of Written Language*. Ed. Martin Nystrand. New York: Academic Press, 1982. 365-81.

Broadhead, Glenn J. and Richard C. Freed. *The Variables of Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting*. Carbondale, IL: SIUP, 1986.

Debs, Mary Beth. "Collaborative Writing in Industry." *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Bertie E. Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow. New York: MLA, 1989. 33-42.

Doheny-Farina, Stephen and Dixie Goswami. "Ethnographic Research on Writing: Assumptions and Methodology". *Writing in Non-Academic Settings*. Eds. Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami. New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1985. 503-535.

Doheny-Farina, Stephen. "Writing in an Emerging Organization: an Ethnographical Study." *Written Communication* 3.2 (1986): 158-85.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1971.

Heath, Shirley Bryce. *Ways with Words*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Harrison, Teresa M. "Frameworks for the Study of Writing in Organizational Contexts." *Written Communication* 4.1 (1987): 3-23.

Knoblauch, C.H. "Intentionality in the Writing Process: a Case Study." *College Composition and Communication* May 1980: 153-59.

LaRoche, Mary G. and Sheryl S. Pearson. "Rhetoric and Rational Enterprises: Reassessing Discourse in Organizational." *Written Communication* 2.3 (1985): 246-68.

Odell, Lee and Dixie Goswami. "Writing in a Non-Academic Setting." *Research in the Teaching of English* 16.3 (1982): 201-23.

Odell, Lee, Dixie Goswami, Anne Herrington and Doris Quick. "Studying Writing in Non-Academic Settings". *New Essays in Technical and Scientific Communication: Research, Theory, Practice*. Ed. Paul V. Anderson, R. John Brockmann and Carolyn R. Miller. Farmingdale, NY: Baywood publishing, 1983. 17-40.

Scribner, S. and M. Cole. "Unpackaging Literacy." *Writing: the Nature, Development and Teaching of Written Communication*. Ed. M.F. Whiteman. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981.

Selzer, Jack. "Composing Processes for Technical Discourse." *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Bertie E. Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow. New York: MLA, 1989. 43-50.

Selzer, Jack. "The Composing Processes of an Engineer." *College Composition and Communication* May 1983: 178-87.

Smircich, Linda. "Concepts of Culture and Organizational Analysis." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 28 (1983): 339-58.